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I used to think that the best way to know and understood a person was to check out the books on their living room shelves. What people read is one indicator of who they are. And so, at the risk of overt rudeness, even as I was being introduced, I used to run my eyes over the titles of the books as soon as I had an opportunity. I confess that I cannot keep my eyes off the books my seatmate is reading on an airplane.

But now I think an even better way to know someone is to figure out a way to check out what is on their refrigerator door. The refrigerator door is, I believe, a place of self revelation where we announce what we care about most: our family, our grandchildren, our parents, a special concert program or church bulletin, a stunning picture of the Obama's or the Romney's, and regardless of who you voted for don't you agree that they surely are the arguably the most attractive and photogenic political families ever.

The refrigerator door is where we announce to the world who we are and who we love and what we care most about. In our kitchen, in the middle of assorted pictures of sons and daughters and sons-in-law and daughters-in-law and, objectively speaking, the most beautiful grandchildren in the world is a small magnet, my favorite, solid black with white block letters that announces "Don't make me come down there. – God."

Parents used to pull out that threat whenever children became unruly downstairs, upstairs, wherever. "Don't make me come down there." It was given to me by an adult daughter who claims that I said it a lot. Or a variation: Driving down the interstate with five children the back of one of those amazing, gas-guzzling nine passenger station wagons in those simple but dangerous days when children were not strapped in, but free to move about, rolling around in the back, wrestling, even a football game I recall, played on knees. And of course, the proverbial turf battle. "He's touching me! She touched me first." … "Don't make me pull over and come back there." It usually worked, particularly when I touched the brake and they could feel the imminence of the threat. It's my favorite refrigerator magnet. "Don't make me come down there! – God."

And it is an almost perfect foil for the first sentence of the 64th chapter of the Book of Isaiah:

"Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence."

Every time I read that favorite Advent text, it reminds me of my favorite entry in one of my favorite books, "Children's Letters to God." I pull it from

the shelf frequently for the simple joy of it – and for the honesty and theological integrity of the thinking of little children.

“Dear God, Are you invisible or is that just a trick? Tracy.”

“Dear God, Is Rev Coe of a friend of yours or do you just know him through business? Dorothy.”

“Dear God, Thank you for the baby brother, but what I prayed for was a puppy. Joyce”

“Dear God, Maybe Cain and Abel would not kill each other if they had their own rooms. It works with my brother.”

And my favorite:

“Dear God, Are you real? Some people don’t believe it. If you are, you better do something quick. Love, Harriet Ann”

It is the oldest, truest, most authentic prayer in human history.

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence
- to make your name known to your adversaries,
so that the nations might quake at your presence.”

“If you are real, you better do something quick,” Harriet Ann put it.

Here’s the situation. The year is 539 BC. The Hebrew people have been living in exile in Babylon for several generations – about 70 years. But now they are coming home to their land and to Jerusalem, Zion, the site of their holy temple. We sing about them every Advent –

“O come, O come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel.”

The Persians have defeated Babylon and set all the captive people held in Babylon free. Now they are finally home after waiting, longing, praying for 70 years. But, after their long journey across the desert, when they arrive, what they see is devastating: the city walls breached, the shining buildings leveled, the beloved Temple, the Holy of Holies, a charred, burned-out ruin. It’s a picture of desolation and despair: like those heart-wrenching news pictures of families returning to their flooded, burned-out homes in Breezy Point and The Rockaways after Hurricane Sandy and the devastating fire that burned down an entire neighborhood. Is there anything more tragic, more heart-wrenching, than families sifting through the ashes, trying to recover something, anything of their former lives, trying to deal with the stark reality that it is gone, their former life, all of it?

Normally, it is the job of a prophet to speak for God to the people. But in this moment of despair the prophet speaks for the people, to God:

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.”

Translate that: “Where in the world are you? Are you there? Are you listening? Have you forgotten us? Is this some kind of joke, bringing us back to this? Even your enemies are laughing. If you can’t do anything for us, you might at least show some muscle to your enemies, let them know you’re still around.”

I suspect every one of us has asked those questions at one time or another. I suspect not a few of us are asking them this morning: about the suffering of innocent children in Gaza, Israel, the Congo, the streets of Chicago, where a young innocent is shot almost every night: the loss of a dear one, a job, a relationship, the loss of a dream, the loss of hope. Where is God? Where are you, God, when things are going badly and we need you most?

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.”

The apparent silence of God, which some theologians have called “Deus abscondus” – the absence of God, in the midst of human suffering. It is one of the enduring mysteries with which men and women have struggled over the centuries. In our time one of the most eloquent and honest strugglers has been, and still is, Elie Wiesel – who was in Chicago for the Humanities Festival this fall and who continues both to give voice to our deepest theological and philosophical questions but also to maintain an even deeper trust. Wiesel was sent to Auschwitz and then Buchenwald as a young boy during the Second World War. Both of his parents and his sister died in the concentration camps and Wiesel has struggled all his life to make some sense of the Holocaust in the context of his Jewish faith. In his remarkable memoir, *Night*, he tells the unforgettable story of the day the concentration camp prisoners were forced to watch the execution of a young Jewish boy. It was ghastly. Wiesel remembers a man behind him asking out loud, “Where is God? Where is God now?” And Wiesel says he heard a voice within saying: “Where is God? He is here…hanging here on the gallows.”

Did Wiesel mean to say that God died that day? That the idea of God was shown to be a myth, is shown to be a myth by every occasion of innocent suffering? Or did he mean something far more profound, something deeply biblical – that God is there, here, in the midst of the suffering. That God is engaged in it too, that God suffers too, that God is there, with them, as the people return to their devastated city, as suffering happens, as innocents die. God – here – in the midst of it all – God with us – Emmanuel?

“Dear God, You better do something quick”

“O that you would tear apart the heavens and come down.”

G.K. Chesterton said once that God came down and slipped in the back door, to surprise us from behind, in the hidden and personal parts of our being.

In our hearts you and I know that that is exactly what happened in a cow shed behind an inn in a small town in Judea on the periphery of the Roman Empire. God came down in the most quiet, most intimate, most human way, in the birth of a child.

That's how God continues to come: in the midst of human life: its sufferings and its joys, its disappointments and its great happiness.

God comes when a woman, in the midst of a successful business career, feels a tug at her heart that will not go away until she upsets the apple cart of her life and quits her job and, of all things, enrolls in Divinity School and becomes a Presbyterian minister and on a bright December morning kneels before her peers and brothers and sisters in the midst of a congregation that has called her to be their minister – God is in that too.

"Don't make me come down there" our refrigerator magnet says. As I was preparing this I walked out to the kitchen to check to see if it was still there and look at it one more time. It's been there for several years, but there it was in the middle of pictures - of a newborn in the arms of her weary but smiling and proud mother, a high school senior holding up a volleyball trophy, three little girls in impossibly cute Halloween costumes, two tiny sisters dressed as angels for the Christmas pageant, a college student playing her cello, a beloved father and grandfather and great-grandfather a few weeks before he died.

"Don't make me come down there?"

God has. God has come all the way down to live our life, to bless our life.

Watch for him, the Bible says. Stay awake. Keep alert. The Lord is coming soon.

Watch for him to come into your life – unexpectedly, quietly, with love and hope.

The word became flesh and dwelt among us.

Thanks be to God.